

APRIL 25 — ST MARK'S PROCESSION
OR
THE GREATER LITANIES

by Dom Gueranger¹

This day [April 25] is honored in the Liturgy by what is called *Saint Mark's Procession*. The term, however, is not a correct one, inasmuch as a Procession was a privilege peculiar to the 25th of April previously to the institution of our Evangelist's feast, which, even so late as the 6th Century, had no fixed day in the Roman Church. The real name of this Procession is, *The Greater Litanies*.

The word *Litany* means Supplication, and is applied to the religious rite of singing certain chants whilst proceeding from place to place, and this in order to propitiate heaven. The two Greek words *Kyrie eleison* (*Lord have mercy on us*) were also called. *Litany*, as likewise were the invocations which were afterwards added to *that cry for Mercy*, and which now form a Liturgical prayer used by the Church on certain solemn occasions.

The *Greater Litanies*, (or Processions,) are so called to distinguish them from the *Minor Litanies*, that is, Processions of less importance as far as the solemnity and concourse of the Faithful were concerned.

We gather from an expression of St. Gregory the Great, that it was an ancient custom in the Roman Church to celebrate, once each year, a *Greater Litany*, at which all the Clergy and people assisted. **This holy Pontiff chose the 25th of April as the fixed day for this Procession**, and appointed the Basilica of St. Peter as the Station.

¹ Gueranger, *The Liturgical Year*, *excerpt*, vol. Paschaltide ii

Several writers on the Liturgy have erroneously confounded this institution with the Processions prescribed by St. Gregory for times of public calamity. It existed long before his time, and all that he had to do with it was the fixing it to the 25th of April. It is quite independent of the Feast of St. Mark, which was instituted at a much later period. If the 25th of April occur during Easter Week, the Procession takes place on that day, (unless it be Easter Sunday,) but the Feast of the Evangelist is not kept till after the Octave.

The question naturally presents itself - why did St. Gregory choose the 25th of April for a Procession and Station, in which everything reminds us of compunction and Penance, and which would seem so out of keeping with the joyous Season of Easter? The first to give a satisfactory answer to this difficulty, was Canon Moretti², a learned Liturgiologist of last [i.e. 18th] century. In a dissertation of great erudition, he proves that in the 5th, and probably even in the 4th. century, the 25th of April was observed at Rome as a day of great solemnity. **The Faithful went, on that day, to the Basilica of St. Peter, in order to celebrate the anniversary of the first entrance of the Prince of the Apostles into Rome,** upon which he thus conferred the inalienable privilege of being the Capital of Christendom. **It is from that day that we count the twenty-five years, two months and some days that St. Peter reigned as Bishop of Rome.** The Sacramentary of St. Leo gives us the Mass of this Solemnity, which afterwards ceased to be kept. St Gregory, to whom we are mainly indebted for the arrangement of the Roman Liturgy, was anxious to perpetuate the memory of a day, which gave to Rome her grandest glory. He, therefore, ordained that the Church of St. Peter should be the Station of the Great Litany, which was always

2 MORETTI. *De Festo in honorem Primipis, .Apostolorum Romae ad diem XX V Aprilis instituto. Romae, 1742, 4°*

to be celebrated on that auspicious day. The 25th of April comes so frequently during the Octave of Easter, that it could not be kept as a Feast, properly so called, in honour of St. Peter's entrance into Rome ; St. Gregory, therefore, adopted the only means left of commemorating the great event.

But there was a striking contrast resulting from this institution, of which the holy Pontiff was fully aware, but which he could not avoid: — it was the contrast between the joys of Paschal Time, and the penitential sentiments wherewith the Faithful should assist at the Procession and Station of the Great Litany. Laden as we are with the manifold graces of this holy Season, and elated with our Paschal joys, — we must sober our gladness by reflecting on the motives which led the Church to cast this hour of shadow over our Easter sunshine. After all, we are sinners, with much to be sorry for, and much to fear; we have to avert those scourges which are due to the crimes of mankind; we have, by humbling ourselves and invoking the intercession of the Mother of God, and the Saints, to obtain the health of our bodies, and the preservation of the fruits of the earth; we have to offer atonement to Divine justice for our own and the world's pride, sinful indulgences, and insubordination. Let us enter into ourselves, and humbly confess that our own share in exciting God's indignation is great; and our poor prayers, united with those of our holy Mother the Church, will obtain mercy for the guilty, and for ourselves who are of the number.

A day, then, like this, of reparation to God's offended Majesty, would naturally suggest the necessity of joining some exterior penance to the interior dispositions of contrition which filled the hearts of Christians. Abstinence from flesh meat has always been observed, on this day, at Rome; and when the Roman Liturgy was established in France, by Pepin and Charlemagne, the Great Litany of the 25th of April was, of course, celebrated, and the Abstinence kept, by the Faithful of that country. A Council of Aix-

la-Chapelle, in 836, enjoined the additional obligation of resting from servile work on this day: the same enactment is found in the Capitularia of Charles the Bald. As regards Fasting — properly so called, being contrary to the spirit of Paschal Time, it would seem never to have been observed on this day, at least not generally. Amalarius, who lived in the 9th Century, asserts that it was not then practiced even in Rome. During the Procession, the Litany of the Saints is sung, followed by several Versicles and Prayers. The Mass of the Station is celebrated in the Lenten Rite, that is, without the *Gloria in excelsis*, and in purple vestments.

We take this opportunity of protesting against the negligence of Christians on this subject. Even persons who have the reputation of being spiritual, think nothing of being absent from the Litanies said on St. Mark's and the Rogation Days. One would have thought, that when the Holy See took from these Days the obligation of Abstinence, the Faithful would be so much the more earnest to join in the duty still left,— the duty of Prayer. The people's presence at the Litanies is taken for granted: and **it is simply absurd, that a religious rite of public reparation should be one from which almost all should keep away.** We suppose that these Christians will acknowledge the importance of the petitions made in the Litanies; but God is not obliged to hear them in favour of such as ought to make them and yet do not. This is one of the many instances which might be brought forward of the strange delusions into which private and isolated devotion are apt to degenerate. When St. Charles Borromeo first took possession of his See of Milan, he found this negligence among his people, and that they left the Clergy to go through the Litanies of the 25th of April by themselves. He assisted at them himself, and walked bare-footed in the Procession. The people soon followed the sainted Pastor's example.